

Lights and Shadows

Volume 28 *Lights and Shadows* Volume 28

Article 7

1984

Uncle's Sam's a Drunk

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Recommended Citation

Perry, C. (1984). Uncle's Sam's a Drunk. *Lights and Shadows*, 28 (1). Retrieved from <https://ir.una.edu/lightsandshadows/vol28/iss1/7>

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"UNCLE SAM'S A DRUNK"

(to Robert Coover)

Clark Perry

Essay

Second Place

America! Baseball, hot dogs,
and apple pie! Harlequin
romances, soap operas, and Mr. T.
Rape, violence, and child pornog-
raphy. Nuclear missiles sleeping
beneath those "amber waves of
grain." America, the beautiful.
America, the biodegradable.

America, the plastic, new and
improved pine-scented. America,
the dark country. America, the
facade.

From the moment I saw the
bloody, tattered flagpole resting in
the umbrella stand, I knew He was

"UNCLE SAM'S A DRUNK" (continued)

in the bar. The dim lighting made it hard to see, but I eventually found Him nestled in a tiny booth towards the back.

His arthritic, liver-spotted hands were clasping a gin and tonic. He looked up at me with sad, red eyes. "Hello," I said. "Hello, Uncle Sam."

Uncle Sam stroked His thin, white goatee. "Oh, it's you." His voice was weak, His speech slurred. "Please, er, have a seat."

I slid into the booth and laid my briefcase on the table between us. He took a sip from His drink and I said, "Gee, You really look like hell with no makeup."

The bags beneath His eyes grew even darker. "Yeah? So sue me." He paused a moment to wipe His mouth with His red, white, and blue sleeve. "On second thought, please don't. The national deficit stands large enough as it is." He did not smile.

He used to smile a lot. Now He did not even show His pearly teeth when He spoke. I thought that perhaps they had been dentures all along. "How many have You had?"

He looked hopefully into the glass He held. Like it was a crystal ball. "Not enough." Uncle Sam wheezed once, twice. "Wish they'd close the curtains in this place."

I looked out the windows. A

black, blocky landscape stretched out before us. "Why? That's America. That's your country out there."

"I wonder sometimes." He took another long gulp and killed the rest of the drink. After He told the bartender to rig up another, He even tried to pull the curtains shut Himself. They would not budge.

I asked, "What's the matter with America?"

"You name it," He chuckled. Then, more seriously, "It's changing. Changing way too fast for an old codger like Me."

"What do you mean?"

He slammed a fist down on the formica table. "Freedom! Freedom's changing in my country. I mean, America was founded upon freedom—pardon Me if I sound like a hackneyed history lesson—but I see bumper stickers that order people to buy American." He leaned forward. His eyebrows clenched together like His fist. "Freedom is exclusive, boy! Hindered by no prejudices whatsoever. They should **be** American. And buy whatever the hell they want to!"

I said, "Lots of arguments about that."

Uncle Sam nodded. "Yep. I know. There used to be not as many arguments. Things were solved easily, once." The bartender

*"How long have
You, ah..."*

*"Been drunk?...Ever
since I realized
that maybe I ain't
so perfect."*

brought His drink. I ordered a Fresca. "Prejudices against foreign nations. Why, we're just as foreign to them as they are to us."

"But, hey, America is **it**. The dreamland."

He snickered. "Oh, my. Look how this Disneyland was built! We rowed our boats over here and stole land from the Indians and threw them all into reservations." Sam shook His head. "We just can't wave the American flag like we used to."

"Yeah, I saw it over there in the umbrella rack. What's all the blood?"

"Viet Nam." He massaged His knuckles. "Watergate. Lebanon. Geez, I've lost count. This arthritis is killing Me... "

"How long have You, ah... "

"Been drunk?" He complemented His assumption with a deep sip from the drink. "Ever since I realized that maybe I ain't, so perfect."

"Definitely. **Am not** so perfect," I corrected Him.

He snarled sarcastically. "Cute." We sat for a long time in silence. He looked painfully out the window from time to time. At last, He said, "Y'know, this is where My gung-ho-good-old-boy attitude brought me. I thought I could do no wrong. My people are being laid off, killed, persecuted by their own desires. I swear to you, I honestly thought that I was leading them in the right direction."

"You were, maybe," I offered.

"Sure. Look what became of it—the 'Ology War.

"UNCLE SAM'S A DRUNK" (continued)

"Theology War?"

"No. The 'Ology War. Ecology versus Technology. Most everything can be traced back to that, somehow." Uncle Sam dramatically wiped a teardrop from His eye as a bald eagle swooped past the window. "Ecology's losing." For the first time that night, He looked straight into my eyes. "I don't know what to do. I'm scared. I feel like... "

I leaned forward. "What?"

"Like someone's taken control of me, somehow. I don't know."

I glanced at my watch quickly. "Well," I said, "gotta run, Sam. I have lots of people to see tonight." I reached for my briefcase, and Uncle Sam grabbed my arm.

"Hey," He asked, "that little emblem right there on your briefcase? KGB. I've seen it somewhere before. What's it mean?"

I pointed carefully to each letter. "Keep Going for Broke. America's new motto. We gotta go for the gusto, right, my man?" I was lucky. He was drunk. Uncle Sam believed me and trusted me. He smiled, and I patted him on the back as I left.

As I walked out of the bar, I flipped the bartender a few tens and twenties. "Give Him what He wants," I said. "Keep Him drunk." I noticed the dust on the bloody flagpole in the umbrella stand; it had been there a long time. "God knows He's going to need it." □